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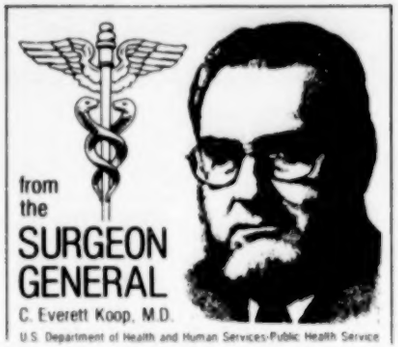

Using Medicines Safely: A Message For Older Americans

The same medicines that we take to cure our illnesses, speed up our recoveries and make us feel better can cause serious health problems if not taken carefully. Medicines work only when people use them as directed and coordinate them properly with what they eat and drink and with other medications they are taking.

Due to the quantity of medicines they take, the difficulty of taking them as prescribed, or the effects of the drugs, older Americans have a greater problem complying with their medicine schedules than the overall population. Because older Americans generally take more medication than other age groups, they also run a particularly high risk of problems resulting from interactions among drugs. Forty percent of the people who encounter adverse reactions from taking multiple drugs are over 60.

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structions or just an expensive prescription, let your doctor know. He may be able to make your treatment easier to follow or prescribe less expensive drugs. Don't hesitate to ask if generic drugs are available for your particular needs.

Never stop taking your medicine without talking with your doctor first. Besides not giving you the medical treatment you need, it could also cause problems down the line. For example, if your doctor believes that you're taking your medication properly, when he examines you he may see problems he thought the drug would alleviate. As a result, he may prescribe a stronger medicine than you need. Be honest about your compliance.

The other person who can help you with your medication is your pharmacist. Talk to your pharmacist about prescriptions you are getting, and ask if there are any special instructions for taking it or any special requirements for storage, such as keeping it in the refrigerator. If you are taking more than one medicine, ask your pharmacist about aids to help you organize your medication schedules.

If you find labels hard to read, ask for larger type. Make sure you understand the exact directions for taking your medicines. You should discuss such statements as "four times a day" or "as needed" to understand exactly when to take them. You can also ask your pharmacist to fill your prescription in easy-to-open containers instead of those with childproof caps.

It's a good idea to make a list of the medicines you take and carry it with

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There are many easy steps older people can take to learn more about their medicines and how their medication schedules should be followed. The most important thing we can do is *talk* to our doctors and pharmacists and listen to their answers. When your doctor prescribes a new drug, be sure to tell him or her what medicines you already are taking, including over-the-counter remedies such as aspirin, laxatives, antacids and so forth. This will help ensure that your new prescription does not react adversely with other drugs you are taking.

Find out the name of the new medicine (both the brand name and the generic name) and ask what it is supposed to do. Ask what foods or beverages you should take it with and what foods, drinks or activities you should avoid while you are on it. Find out if there are likely to be any side effects and, if so, what they may be and what you should do if you get them. Tell your doctor about any adverse reactions or allergies you have had to medicines in the past.

To have their intended effect, medicines must be taken at certain intervals in certain strengths. Follow your doctor's recommendations and schedule for taking your medicine. If you have trouble taking your medicines as directed, whether because of an inconvenient schedule, hard-to-follow in-

you. Then you can show it to your doctor and pharmacist when you are getting a new prescription drug or need a recommendation on over-the-counter remedies you may be purchasing. Besides understanding what you are now using, you should take inventory in your medicine cabinet and get rid of old medicines. Throw out all over-the-counter drugs whose expiration dates have passed.

Your pharmacist can tell you how to keep prescription drugs. Take any medicines that are hard to identify to your pharmacist, who can tell you what it is and if it is still effective.

It is important to store drugs in a cool, dark location to preserve their potency. Humidity and heat often can weaken drugs, so avoid storing them in bathroom cabinets or near kitchen stoves.

Be sure to throw away any medicines that friends or family members may have given you. Some people like to share their medication with friends whom they believe have the same problem. While they mean well, sharing medicine is dangerous because people react differently to medicines, even if they have the same condition.

Healthy older people use medicines safely. Make sure your medicines do for you what they are supposed to do: Help you lead a longer, healthier and more active life.